

Catafalque – Carl Jung and the End of Humanity

by Peter Kingsley

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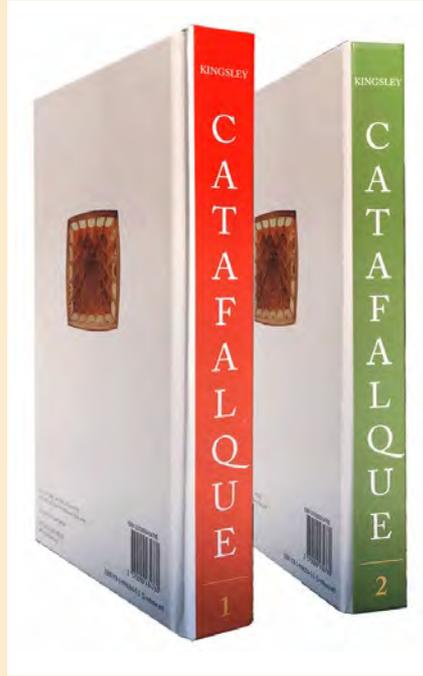
Reviewed by Peter Davison

Those familiar with the writings of Peter Kingsley will know that he offers a unique perspective on Western culture and that he expresses himself with a remarkable fluency. Above all, he is fearless in addressing the great questions of existence, speaking with the authority of a genuinely prophetic voice. His previous books, which include *In the Dark Places of Wisdom and Reality*, explore the esoteric world of pre-Socratic philosophy, specifically the mystical writings of Empedocles and Parmenides. Our civilisation, he believes, has lost its way due to Plato's and Aristotle's misreading of these visionary contemplatives, resulting in a disastrous bias toward rationality and analytical enquiry. The West, according to the author, must return to its mystical and ancient roots or face a calamitous end.

The latest publication by this virtuoso writer is *Catafalque – Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*. The title, we learn, came to Kingsley in a dream and we are told that a catafalque is a raised platform for a coffin or corpse placed on public view. The book intends that we should witness the death of a once great King and mourn his loss. It signals nothing less than the end of modernity. The age of rationalism, which has brought humanity to the brink of spiritual and environmental catastrophe, must rightly be allowed to die.

As if such a portent were not enough, this is also a book about Kingsley's relationship with the life and work of the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. The association for Kingsley is deeply personal and the accusation he makes, that Jung has been wilfully misunderstood by his followers, is guaranteed to stir protest among contemporary Jungians. The case is made that, as Plato misinterpreted his forebears of the pre-Socratic school, so Jung's disciples have also wilfully misinterpreted his work for their own ends. It is the fate of all Gnostics perhaps to be misunderstood, but Kingsley suggests that we know only a cardboard cut-out Jung, a man stripped of his prophetic power.

Kingsley cites Jung's *Red Book* (finally published in 2009) as the primary source of the authentic man. It is a work of



syncretic mysticism in the form of sacred texts and symbolic illustrations, much of it dictated by spirit guides through dreams and visions. Jung often stated that modern man was doomed by his unwillingness to communicate with the dead, who possess the wisdom of the ancestors. It was Jung's aim to deliver their numinous message to humanity. Yet, at the end of his life, Jung felt he had failed in his task and, fearing for the future, he dreamt that the world would be destroyed by a global catastrophe. His final years were haunted not only by a sense of failure, but a realisation that even those closest to him did not grasp the true meaning of his prophecy.

In *Catafalque* Peter Kingsley convincingly argues that Jung's scientific work was based entirely on intuitions from his unconscious, a fact ignored by most of his wider circle. One of the few who truly related to Jung was the Sufi scholar, Henry Corbin. Corbin, like Jung, combined a fascination for mysticism with rigorous scholarship and their friendship gave the two men much consolation. Indeed, some of *Catafalque's* most significant insights surround their efforts to conceal, as well as reveal, their inner worlds. The soul is shy, forced into retreat when confronted by the inquisitive gaze of modernity, and this was surely the cause of Jung's and Corbin's agony.

Kingsley, echoing Jung's prognosis, repeatedly informs us that our civilisation is already dead and only a foolish man would disagree. If we are to revive our culture, Kingsley tells us, we must listen to the collective unconscious. But our modern world is so dazzled by science that the very idea of mystical prophecy

provokes hostility and scepticism. We are reminded by Kingsley that divine utterance could not have ended with the formulation of the world's great religions so, if there is divine silence, it must be because we have stopped listening. A living divinity is perhaps just too disconcerting for us to accept and, while the apparent certainties of scientific discourse grant specious authority to such self-limiting beliefs, Kingsley consistently challenges us to think again. Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, he is the madman preaching from the mountain top, instructing us to let the Old King die so that a new culture may be born. The rhetoric at times possesses a Wagnerian sweep and references to the Holy Grail legend bring *Parsifal* to mind, itself a powerful music drama of spiritual transformation.

Despite the grandeur and the wildness, Kingsley retains the poise of a dedicated scholar, meticulous in presentation and argument. Yet there is nothing dry or pedantic in his prose. The text has the intensity of a whodunnit and the exalted lyricism of an epic poem. It is, indeed, hard to put the book down, as the reader is expertly led into a labyrinth of connections, symbols and mind-altering revelations. *Catafalque's* hypnotic power draws us back to the pre-Socratic era, when poetry, music, history and wisdom were conjured from Nature by individuals who were simultaneously philosophers, healers, prophets and magicians. Their words were incantatory, creating the world around them out of their inner imagination. Today we seem unable either to listen to Nature or to give her a voice and, consequently, Nature suffers. Kingsley invites us to attend once more, joining in Nature's howl of pain, thus to learn that her pain is also our own.

Catafalque is an impressive work, more an act of active imagination than a conventional narrative. The reluctant prophet pulls at our sleeves to be sure we understand. We are called upon to cast aside assumptions, critical consensus, cultural norms and personal prejudice. We are asked to jump into the fire of the unknown, accepting the possibility of destruction, but trusting that the archetypes of the unconscious are constantly making things anew.

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